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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined the effect of British parents' social class on their ability to intervene in their children's schooling and to participate as "active consumers." In this case study of one school in England, data were derived from a questionnaire mailed to 491 parents of pupils in years 7, 9, and 11; interviews with 60 parents selected at random from the survey sample; and interviews with 15 teachers and various school administrators. Despite the climate of increased statutory rights for parents and increased expectations for teacher accountability, middle-class parents intervened in their children's education more frequently than did their working-class counterparts. Working-class parents had less access to information and were usually more reluctant to question teachers' professional knowledge and take up teachers' time. They also tended to hold unclear aspirations for their children's futures. In addition, although many middle-class parents expressed commitment to equal educational opportunities, they were not primarily concerned with the needs of all pupils. The appendix contains the interview guide. (Contains 30 references.) (LMI)

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Empowering the Powerful: a discussion of the interrelation of government policies and consumerism with social class factors and the impact of this upon parent interventions in their children's schooling

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Abstract

This paper focuses on parents' involvement with their child's schooling and the possible influences upon this. At a time when parental involvement is regarded as being highly important to a child's school achievement and given the Government's promotion of the role of parents in education, the conditions should be particularly conducive to involving all parents in this significant role. It will be argued, however, that in spite of increased statutory rights and a changing attitude towards parents by teachers and schools, parents' social class location continues to have a direct impact upon their ability to intervene in their child's schooling. The paper concludes that increased parental involvement is probably desirable but the nature of this and its operationalisation needs to be carefully thought out.

It has become commonplace to talk about the importance of parents in the educational process, at least in certain respects. According to Brown (1990), for instance, we are now in the age of 'parentocracy' where parent power is a requisite for gaining educational success and Deem (1994), for example, states that parents, together with lay governors and employers, "are seen to be the prime movers in a system which downgrades the importance of educational professionals." (p27) Potentially parents have been empowered to have a greater say in their children's education, to ensure educational standards are maintained, if not improved. Indeed the changes brought about by successive Education Acts throughout the past 15 years has led to the development of parent involvement in terms of parents as consumers. Most recent research into the marketisation of education has been concerned with parents as consumers in terms of school 'choice'. It is argued in this paper that the current climate in education, brought about by the reforms, has potentially enabled the parent to operate as consumers also within the context of the school, that is, in relation to the child's learning experience. In this context the parent as consumer manifests itself in terms of parents intervening in their child's education and /or calling teachers to account.

Given the long established importance of parental involvement in having a positive impact on their children's school achievement (Plowden 1967, Macbeth 1989, National Commission 1994), it could be argued that there is an opportunity here for the parents of the lowest achieving pupils, notably working class

and black children, to intervene on their child's behalf and thus support an improvement in their schooling.

However, just as research into school 'choice' has shown that the educational 'market' can advantage or disadvantage parents depending on their particular social, cultural and economic circumstances (see eg Ball 1993, Gewirtz and Ball 1995), it is my contention that parents' social class[1] location has a direct impact upon their ability to intervene in their child's schooling and to participate as 'active consumers'. The active consumer is the parent who can discern the nature and value of the education on offer and act on this, in order to maximise the opportunities for her/his child to achieve success, usually in the form of high status examinations. Previous sociological research into education has of course also demonstrated that middle class parents have tended to intervene whenever they deemed it to be necessary (see eg Lacey 1970, Connell 1981). However, recent government educational policy has created the conditions for potentially greater parental intervention for *all* parents. As John Major (1992) said himself, in a speech to the Adam Smith Institute, (cited in Troyna 1994), " We mean to empower not just

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[1] Whilst it is recognised that gender and ethnicity play a significant part in affecting parents' roles in relation to their children's schooling, I have decided here to separate out the analysis of social class from these other two dimensions. The majority of the parents in our study are, in fact, women and whilst as I do mention later on in the paper, their attitudes to the school are different in some respects from those of the men, these gendered positions do not override the social class implications. With regard to ethnicity, there were only two black parents in this particular sample. I have begun to consider the role of black parents elsewhere (Crozier and Pegg 1994; Crozier 1995).

the enterprising, but all people...." and the Parents' Charter (sent to all Parents in England and Wales) urges parents to become active partners "with the school and its teachers" in order to "get the best education for [their] child" (p25). Behind these sentiments, it is argued, rather than egalitarianism, is the strategy to operationalise an educational market economy; hence, the location of parents in the role of consumers. What follows is a discussion of this parental role within the context of the schooling process. In particular, the circumstances or events that might give rise to parental interventions and the conditions which make it possible for some parents to intervene and others not are explored. Additionally, the impact of an active or powerful group of consumers (qua parents) upon a passive or less powerful group and the possible consequences for the children of the latter will be discussed.

Research Methods

The paper is based on data arising from a three year research project (currently in its second year) into parental involvement, involving parents of children in years 7, 9 and 11 from two secondary schools. The specific data which are discussed here are drawn from parents accessed through only one of our study schools.

The research employed an interpretative paradigm based on the premise of seeking an understanding of the actors' meanings

whilst recognising that these are located within a socio-political context. The data were gathered by means of a questionnaire sent to 491 parents of pupils in year 7,9 and 11 and semi-structured interviews (see appendix 1 for check-list of questions) with 60 of the parents selected at random from the questionnaire responses. Fifteen teachers from the school were interviewed. These included heads of years 7,9 and 11, the heads of upper and lower school and subject heads. The head teacher, a deputy head, the chair of governors and three other governors were also interviewed. The perspective presented here, however, is mainly that of the parents, although the teachers and governor interview data serve to validate the parent responses. All the interviews lasted one to 1 to 1 hour and 30 minutes; they were taped recorded and later transcribed. All names have been changed.

Definitions of social class are, as we know, problematic. For the purpose of our research we wanted to build up a broader picture of parents' backgrounds so that we could discern some indication of their cultural capital in relation to education which might be termed 'educational knowledge'. For this purpose we gathered data on parents' own education, qualifications and housing status. Nevertheless, in terms of categorising parents in this paper only the Goldthorpe, Hope (1978, 1987) social class categories have, at present, been used. It is probably worth noting that in the majority of cases occupation and education/qualifications tended to correspond. Based upon the Goldthorpe, Hope categories, therefore, I have allocated parents

into the two broad groups of middle class and working class.

Some details about Brightside School

The school, through which we accessed parents, known here as Brightside, has 950 pupils, 150 of these are in the Sixth Form. It is a co-educational comprehensive school, located in a city. The children are drawn from a wide area throughout the city and surrounding areas. In response to a question about his impression of the social class composition of the school, the head replied that in his view 60% of the parents were middle class, many of these being professionals, and some being from social class "C1"; 40% were working class. In terms of our sample of parents, slightly more parents represented the professional class and intermediate class at 70.4%.

According to parents and teachers, parent-school relationships could be described as very positive at Brightside. In their questionnaire responses, the vast majority of parents said that they were *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with the school; they described the school as accessible and said that communication from the school was 'good'. These views were born out by our interview data from parents, and teachers too described relations with parents as 'good' and that they welcomed parental 'involvement'.

Parents were kept informed of on-going events and developments by a monthly newsletter and details of syllabuses, exam details

and so on were provided in a year booklet. Parents were given termly information about their child's progress by means of a grade card (the child received a grade for effort and a grade for achievement) and a yearly written report providing more detailed information. Parents were also given the opportunity to make comments on the yearly report and in their child's homework diary. The heads of year and form tutors were in close contact with parents and would contact parents if they were concerned in any way with a child. Likewise parents felt able to contact the school by telephoning and or arranging a visit if anything was troubling them. They said they did not feel intimidated by the school or teachers. This was the case for parents irrespective of social class. The differences in such behaviour were in whether parents actually took such action.

Parents as Consumers

Few of our respondents actually described themselves as 'consumers'. This response is borne out by other research on parents for example, Hughes, Wikeley and Nash (1994) and McClelland et al (1995). The exception to this, in our study, was some of the fathers who talked about education and the market in relation to the way the school responded (or not) to the 'market' and how that affected them as parents.

Clearly, the provision of education, as others have noted too (see for example, Walford 1994), cannot be easily equated with

the purchase and consumption of a product like black forest gateau or a television set. Moreover, parents are not themselves 'consuming' the education on offer but they are acting as consumers on behalf of their children, in so far as they are overseeing the accumulation of the 'product'. Their actions as consumers, within the context of the school, could be described as taking the form of questioning: the actions and practices of the teacher; course content; policy decisions; organisational decisions and so on.

In the past such actions by parents have been referred to as 'accountability' and of course it could be argued that this has nothing to do with the marketisation of education since some parents have always exerted the 'right', to call teachers to account (see eg Elliott et al 1981). However, as already stated, it is my contention that Government reforms have enhanced the climate for parental accountability by giving them greater rights which potentially increase their ability to fulfil this role. Part of this is also to do with the fact schools are more conscious of the market and aware of parents' potential power to create an undesirable fuss, possibly drawing even less desirable media attention, or ultimately to remove their child from the school.

Teachers, at Brightside, did not refer to parents as consumers either, but there is evidence to show that they were aware that they could and did operate as such. Brightside was responsive to parents' concerns and aware of the potential power of parents.

The Head, for instance, spoke about the power and influence of the professional element amongst the parents whose views had to be addressed and half of the teachers interviewed referred to the influence of certain groups of parents. That is not to say parents always 'got their own way', or that the school felt intimidated by its parents, most subject heads said that they would not change their academic judgement simply because a parent was not happy with it. Nevertheless, most of our respondents who did intervene on behalf of their children reported a positive outcome, from their point of view, of their actions. In addition to this, there had been in recent months a number of events which gave rise to groups of parents organising protests which resulted in the school changing their decisions.

However, as Featherstone (1991) argues to view consumption as solely in relation to production is limited. In order to fully appreciate the implications for parents and children of the marketisation of education, it is necessary to understand the "culture of consumption" (ibid) and the various perspectives on this. One of these perspectives, is the competitiveness that consumption can give rise to and the maintenance of social barriers through these endeavours (Douglas and Isherwood 1980). So for example, we can see this in parents' actions in relation to schools; having acquired the school of their choice, they are intent upon ensuring that it fulfils their expectations. Whilst there is a strong liberal sentiment in terms of a desire for their children to have a holistic educational experience and a commitment to equal opportunities, expressed by the middle class

parents, at Brightside, there is also the view of the need for subject setting from year 7, in the core subjects. One of the enduring concerns about comprehensive education, fed by the New Right is that comprehensive schools teach only to the 'middle' and consequently produce mediocre results. The middle class parents in our study tended to have high expectations for their children: they expected them to do A levels and go on to university. Hence, parents' rationale for intervening on their child's behalf is to maintain the standard of education which they,themselves, deem to be necessary in order that their child is adequately prepared for their future career. Their consumerist interventions are a means of ensuring that their expectations are met and thus the social barriers are maintained.

The Active Consumer

Although placed in the role of consumer not all parents played an active part as such. At a minimal level all parents attended, parents'evenings, at least on some occasions, helped their child with homework if asked and read the termly grade card. In that sense they could be said to be 'over-seeing' the 'product-process'. However, some parents were much more active than this. Below I briefly present a comparison of different parents' actions as consumers.

Parents' interventions were concerned with both non-academic (such as school uniform issues) as well as the academic spheres. The interventions occurred in various ways from raising a

question or issue at parents' evening, to making additional visits to the school to speak with a teacher or telephoning the teacher. Issues or queries ranged from wanting the teacher to explain a grade given on a grade card; a disagreement over subject choice options; their child being bullied, or misbehaving, to the defence of their child for wearing a nose stud or the wrong coloured trainers.

Most parents said they were satisfied with the school and the progress their child was making. Consequently, they said they had little reason to contact the school and get involved. In spite of this, however, it is very clear from our data that the middle-class parents did contact the school fairly frequently. They showed no reticence in doing so. One such parent, Mr Tate, for example, contacted the year tutor because his son was showing little interest in his school or school work. The school responded by encouraging the boy together with some friends to set up a lunchtime games club. Another parent Mrs Mills, had a child who had some difficulties with spelling; her child was given extra support by the school which involved leaving the mainstream class for limited periods of time. The child refused to do this. In response to her daughter's reaction Mrs Mills made an appointment to speak with the form tutor and extra work was arranged for the child to do at home with Mrs Mills' support. Another middle-class parent, Mr Cross, was very perturbed that his son couldn't do one of his chosen subjects at A level. Mr Cross's intervention resulted in his son being able to do the subject of his choice.

By contrast, working-class parents rarely intervened and tended to do so only within the non-academic spheres. They also tended to be reactive rather than proactive. Mrs Jake, for example, was faced with a similar difficulty with her child, as Mrs Mills. Mrs Jake's child had some learning difficulties. He,too, was given extra support by the school which required him to leave the mainstream class for limited periods of time. Like Mrs Mills' child he refused to do this. However, Mrs Jake never thought to go to the school. She tried to help her son at home on her own, although this was to no avail, as she said, "I'm not a teacher. I mean, he wouldn't listen to me."

Mrs Wicks, another working class parent, whose daughter had been at Brightside a year, was concerned that her books often went unmarked but she hadn't taken this up with the teachers. She said she would wait and see if the situation improved the next year. She said, "I don't like fussing. I'm not one of those that gets into the school every two minutes... ." She went on to say that "She's [her daughter] only in her second year, nearer the exams we'll need to find out more."

There were some working class parents who weren't so reticent but our evidence demonstrates that this tended to be mainly in relation to the child's behaviour and in response to actions taken by the school. Mrs Lowe, for example, described her son as "presenting a challenge" to the school. He'd had some difficult times and as a result she had been to the school on various occasions:

"The thing is I've had some run-ins up there; when I think Jimmy's done something stupid - alright he might not have been guilty of it, and he might have been, but I will stand behind my kids, no matter what. I'll go up there and fight for my kids and that's what I've done..."

Whilst, parents may have been concerned about a school wide issue such as subject choice, the majority were mainly concerned with the education of their own child. Hence, the evidence suggests, they only intervened if their own child was affected. Their interventions over, for example, option choices as in the case of Mr Tate above, or the demand for setting, referred to earlier, was not tempered by the possibility of a knock-on effect for other children.

Such practices are endemic of the individualism of education brought about by Government reforms throughout the past decade and borrowing a phrase from Ball (1990) could be described as 'the privatisation of values'. Put this way, the potential for competitiveness between parents can be easily imagined. As far as competing for teachers' time, is concerned, teachers did say that certain groups of parents demanded more than their share of time which might have been spent supporting greater needs.

What then motivates and enables parents to become 'active' consumers'? Bowe et al (1994) argue that "To focus on 'the act of consumption' or the culture of consumption' is to draw attention away from the profoundly social nature of the process."

(p49) It is suggested here that whether or not parents operate as consumers, how they operate as consumers if they do so at all, and why they operate as consumers is influenced by a complex interrelation of factors. Some of these are dealt with below.

Parent's Perception of Her/His Own Role in Relation to the Child's Education

All the parents interviewed saw their role as supporting their children making sure that they were happy and doing well, at least as far as they themselves perceived what 'well' might be. As I have said, the vast majority of our respondents were concerned solely with their own child or children. In terms of school governance, few parents, either middle-class or working-class felt that they knew enough about educational issues or the management of the school, and therefore did not feel sufficiently confident to become involved in this way. Also most parents said they didn't have the time for this kind of involvement. Some parents, of course were involved in the PTA; two of our respondents were parent governors; some parents helped in the school library; some helped with school concerts or transporting children to and from sports' events and very occasionally some were invited into school to share some expertise or information with a group of pupils. Parents involved in these ways tended to be middle-class parents.

When asked directly 'how they saw their role in relation to their child's education', most parents' replies, irrespective of class,

included such remarks as "getting them to school on time", "making sure they are properly clothed", "being supportive", "making sure the homework was done", "being a back-up to the school". However, the ways in which parents' roles manifested themselves became clearer as parents talked specifically about their child and the school. Although they didn't put it necessarily in these terms, all parents played some part in monitoring their child's educational and social progress through school; some parents also monitored the teachers' actions in relation to their child.

On the face of it, then, most parents appeared to see their role (in relation to their child's education) in very similar ways. However, the ways in which parents 'supported' their children and acted as a result of their 'monitoring' clearly differed along class lines.

There was a strong reliance amongst working-class parents on the teachers as professionals, to do the job of educating their child. They expected the teachers to know more than them and therefore, didn't see it as their responsibility to take the initiative in terms of teaching their own child. Again as Mrs Jake (referred to above) said, "he's [her son] set work, and it's up to them [the teachers] really to make sure that it's done, as far as I'm concerned." Her attitude here might be construed as indifference. I suggest, however, that she is not saying that she wants no part in her child's education (indeed, this particular parent did read her son's homework diary and tried to

keep a check on whether he was doing what he was supposed to do) but rather that ultimately it is the teachers who are responsible for her child's achievement. Another working-class parent Mr Brown whose child also had learning difficulties, said: "The thing is, I feel that...you've got to leave it to the teachers to do...George's got this problem and we do all we can for him. But the thing is, obviously, they [the teachers], well, I feel, they ought to know what they're doing."

Some middle-class parents, also, gave recognition to teachers' professionalism and asserted that they had no desire to tell teachers how to do their job. However, this did not prevent them, if they saw it as necessary, from intervening on behalf of their child.

The Parent's Understanding of the Child's Educational Needs

Linked to the parent's perception of her/his role in relation to her/his child's education is the extent to which the parent understands the child's educational needs. Lareau (1989) in her study in the USA of parents of children of elementary school age, argues that middle-class parents tend to help their children at home more than working-class parents. In terms of material help, I would agree this tends to be the case. The middle-class parents in our study tended to have more disposable income to spend on computers and CD Roms; they also tended to live in larger houses where there was space and quietness to do homework and they tended to have greater access to reference material. With regard

to other kinds of help, I feel Lareau's statement blurs a more complex scenario. Most working-class as well as middle-class parents did help, or tried to help, their children with homework if their child asked for it and particularly if their child had a special educational need which again cut across class lines. Where I suggest there was a differential was with regard to the quality of the help. The middle-class parents had furthered their education and had more educational qualifications than the working-class parents and therefore, more likely to understand the child's homework. Nevertheless, because of the changes in the education system and in particular with the introduction of the National Curriculum many middle-class parents also said that they didn't always understand what their children were doing. In fact this was one area in particular where parents complained that they would like more information from the school. However, they recognised that things had moved on, whilst working-class parents tended to assume that it was just them: their child's school work was beyond their understanding.

In order to act as a consumer one needs to know about the 'product' that one is 'purchasing' and the options available; one also needs to be clear about why one wants to 'buy' this particular 'product' in the first place. Middle-class parents have this knowledge: they have a clear view of what they want the schools to do for their children and if they do not feel the school/teacher is meeting their expectations,then they will address the school on the specific matter. As one parent said when he talks with teachers at parents' evening,

"I bear in mind the extent to which the children are achieving their potential. This is what I ask the teachers about."

Another parent said when explaining what kind of dialogue he has at parents' evening:

" Some teachers have asked, 'what are you looking for in your child's education?' To which my answer is, 'what are you giving my child's education. When I hear what you're saying then I might be able to judge whether I like what you're saying or not.' "

Furthermore, these parents made analyses of their children's educational progress and were able to talk at some length about various aspects of this. This is in contrast to the working-class parents who did not elaborate on their child's academic progress and when asked about this tended to focus on their behaviour.

In addition to this, it is suggested that middle-class parents are better placed to interpret the significance of the information they are given about their child and are thus more able to ask the questions which will elicit further information, whilst working-class parents are not. For example, Mrs Cooper, a working-class parent, clearly did not know what kinds of qualifications her son needed to continue with his training after leaving school. When asked about what her son was going to do when he left the school later that year, replied:

"I think he wants to go on a Youth Training Scheme. But that depends on his results."

Interviewer: "What does he need to get?"

Parent: "I'm not sure, (pauses) he needs a couple of As, er, passes, I think, in Maths and English, maybe."

In talking about 'invisible pedagogies' Bernstein (1975) argued that working-class parents in not understanding their theoretical basis were unable to diagnose their child's progress and thus were unable to provide specific support. In the same way if the parents in our study are unable to fully appreciate the needs of their children, and are unable to recognise that they need to play a role here and ask, they too will be unable to act on their behalf in order to ensure success. It is this lack of information in order to make their own assessment that leaves working-class parents, as Bernstein also commented, so dependent upon the teachers' judgement.

Where working-class parents seemed to have a clearer view about their child's educational progress and hence more contact with the school, was if the child had some learning difficulties. In these cases, there was more focused dialogue between the teacher responsible for special educational needs and the parent; the educational issues were mainly literacy and were within the parents' grasp. Furthermore, the teacher explained to the parents how they might specifically help the child such as

listening to her/him read. Also, in these cases, the child's difficulties would frequently have been identified by the primary school. The parents would therefore have been alerted to the child's needs and have been given some advice on how to support her/him.

Clearly without the 'right' kind of knowledge parents are unable to act effectively to intervene on their child's behalf. The prior educational experiences of parents have been cited as contributing to that. In addition, parents acquire cultural capital/educational knowledge through a variety of other means. One of these is through networking and the relationship with the school and teachers.

Networking and the Parent's Relationship with the School/Teacher

Overall relationships between parents and teachers were very positive from both parents' and teachers' points of view. Relationships thrived particularly well where parents' views of education and the needs of the child matched those of the teachers. One of the reasons parents found the school approachable, as already stated, was because the ethos of the school was conducive to that; there was a 'tradition' in the school of a two-way communication between teachers and parents.

In addition to this, however, middle-class parents tended to feel more comfortable within the context of the school. They were professionals themselves; many of them had trained as teachers

and were teaching now in schools or were FE or HE lecturers. Many of them knew teachers and quite a number of them knew Brightside teachers and/or governors socially. Some were involved in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or in other aspects of the school. Indeed one parent who helped in the school library explained that through this she felt she knew the school very well. She went on to say:

"...I get a lot of inside information from the librarian. Not intentionally at all, but we chat. That's usually why I help in schools because I just like to hear what's going on and what they say about members of staff. It gives you a general picture of the school."

Moreover, they were articulate and they understood and could use the language of education. Through such experiences these parents amassed the cultural capital of educational knowledge which enabled them to become active consumers on behalf of their children. Indeed as Lareau (1989) noted in her study the middle-class parents "forge relationships [with the school/teachers] characterized by an interconnectedness between family life and school life." (p8) And Deem and Brehony (1995) observed that in the main it is middle-class parents who become involved in governors and decision-making activities.

Working-class parents by contrast tended not to have access to these networks, or educational knowledge to the same extent, nor the inclination to become involved in the PTA and other school

groups or activities. Many of the working-class parents lived in the outlying parts of the city and there was a greater physical separation of them from the school. None of the working-class parents we spoke to knew the Brightside teachers socially and with the exception of one mother who was a School Meals Supervisory Assistant (SMSA) none had links with education other than through their own child or children. Where parents had older children who had been to Brightside they had more knowledge of the school than those who did not and for those parents who had primary aged children or older children at other schools, this provided a source of educational knowledge. Nevertheless, although working-class parents spoke positively about the school and described the school and teachers as accessible, they expressed a distinct feeling of distance between themselves and the school. One parent for example, repeatedly referred to the school as " up there." Another parent, explained that she felt they were not known at the school and speaking about her daughter, said,

"She's a small cog in a big wheel, unless she's done anything really terrible there's no reason for them to contact us."

And another parent who had had several children at the school, when asked if she attended the PTA or other such meetings replied,

"No. I find those sort of meetings very cliquey. You're

either in or you're way on the outside and I always felt myself way on the outside, so I thought 'stuff it'."

Thus working-class parents have limited opportunities for finding out what goes on in school which could in turn help them make an assessment of their child's educational progress and lead to enabling them to become more active consumers.

Conclusion

In spite of the climate of the market and the expectations on parents to call teachers to account, it is still middle-class parents who are the most active in this.

I have shown that the class locations of the parents which indicate their cultural capital, continue to have a profound impact upon such behaviour and in particular, the extent to which parents can operate as active consumers. The reticence of working-class parents to question the professional knowledge of the teacher and their reluctance to take up teachers' time, has been discussed. I have also shown that because of working-class parents' cultural framework or habitus, they do not hold a vision of their child's future. Without such, it is impossible for them to direct and guide their child to appropriate credentialling and thus intervene on their child's behalf if the school is failing the child in that particular endeavour.

That is not to suggest that working-class parents have no

interest in their children's education or indeed that they do not have aspirations for them but rather that their aspirations are unclear. The most common response from working-class parents about what they wanted from their child's education was that they would 'do well' and be 'happy'. What was meant by 'doing well' was left to the professional to decide and determine. A system which advocates a self-help approach is going to disadvantage those who aren't equipped in the same way as others 'to help themselves'.

Moreover, it will be remembered that parents tend to focus their involvement on the needs of their own child; they are not primarily concerned with the needs of all pupils. Neither do they, and nor could they, have an overview of the needs and available resources to meet these, of the whole school. At Brightside, for example, whilst many of the middle-class respondents expressed liberal sentiments, exemplified in their stated commitment for equal opportunities, they also expressed disquiet about the effect of mixed ability grouping on their own child's progress. Although there is little evidence to support the view that streaming raises standards there is evidence that demonstrates its negative consequences for black and working-class children (Mac an Ghaill 1988, Ball 1981). The impact of the powerful parents or the most active consumers who are in the majority, as at Brightside, could have damaging consequences for the minority where their interests are not represented. Indeed passive consumers in the market place will get trampled underfoot when the doors of the sale are flung open.

Greater accountability of teachers and involvement of parents in their children's education is no bad thing in itself. However, parental involvement cannot be left to the vagaries of the market. Instead, the nature of that involvement needs to be carefully considered; it must be carefully managed, and as part of that nurtured, by the school. But clearly, some parents' involvement needs more nurturing and support than others. There is a tension here for teachers since greater parental involvement potentially, at least, embodies a threat to their professionalism. However, it is clear from our research and that of others (Bastiani 1993 Wolfendale 1989) that teachers, in principle, recognise the importance of their partnership with parents and they have a commitment to developing this. The challenge for them, though, is twofold: firstly, in they way they define the partnership and the nature of that development and secondly, in whether or not they are willing to take on the responsibility for ensuring an equal opportunity for all parents to have their say.

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Appendix 1

Check-list of questions used in the semi-structured interview with the parents

Following on from the questionnaire, further details of making secondary school choice

Parents' expectations of the school and of the teachers

Child's progress; teachers' and parent's view of child's progress, teachers'and parent's expectations of the child

Have parents been interventionist in their child's schooling? If so, in what ways? If so, do they feel that the child's school experience has been improved by their involvement?

In what ways do parents expect/want to influence school/teacher decisions. Do they feel that they are able to influence decisions in any way - can they give any examples.

Details of information from school about their child and in general

What do they know of the National Curriculum and Assessment. How do they know about this. What do they know of the GCSE ?

Accessibility of the school/teachers; parent's relationship with the school, with the teachers; how do parents see their own role in relation to the school?

Parent's involvement in social events, PTA; helping in the classroom etc. Nature of the involvement.

Help with homework; do they want more information on how they might support their child.

Ask if they know other parents, any of the teachers in the school, socially or anyone else connected with the school

Has the school any particular expectations of the parent Should it have. Has their child any particular expectations of them as a parent, in relation to schooling/education

School Governors: knowledge of, contact with parent governors. Attendance at AGM, why/why not.

Decision -making role for parents/ or opportunity to have a greater say in school matters. Are parents concerned with the wider issues of education/within the school that are not directly concerned with their child's immediate progress

Regarding year 7 parents - differences between primary and secondary schools

Personal details: Married, Single, Divorced; Number of children and their ages

Full details of occupation and education of mother and father; details of housing; ethnicity

If only one parent is interviewed need to ascertain details of the other parent's involvement